

## **Tools for pastors and congregational leadership**

- **Breaking the silence from the pulpit**  
Preaching about domestic violence is not an easy task and sometimes can be risky, but it is worth the risk to begin the healing.
- **Responding to domestic violence: guidelines for pastors**  
What are the dos and don'ts in responding to victims and perpetrators? Knowing the basics provided in this tip sheet by the Faith Trust Institute may save a life.
- **A policy statement on domestic violence couples counseling**
- **What if you are a new pastor in a new community?**
- **What if your congregation discovered a church officer was charged with domestic violence?**
- **What if the church or the presbytery doesn't want to talk about domestic violence?**

## Breaking the Silence from the Pulpit

Although October is the natural time to pay particular attention to domestic violence, naming this issue throughout the year will send the message that your congregation is a safe place for persons to seek help. While preaching is important, remember that breaking the silence can also be done through public prayer, healing services, educational events and by partnering with your local abuse and sexual assault center. All efforts will send a message that your congregation understands that abuse is not what God intends.

In an article in the 2006 Domestic Violence Awareness Packet, Kevin Fredrick, co-moderator of PADVN, wrote, “It is not enough for a well-meaning pastor to launch into addressing domestic violence from the pulpit unless he or she engages in adequate educational training. Domestic violence has many levels to it, each which must be explored and understood including social, psychological, legal, and the theological dimensions of the issue. A well-informed pastor must know how the Bible and theology have been misused by pastors in counseling and preaching, most dramatically to the detriment of the victim, but even for the perpetrator. They must know why couples counseling and anger management courses are not only inadequate but may actually have dangerous implications if used in addressing family violence with victims and perpetrators.”

It is important to remember that victims, survivors, perpetrators and bystanders will be sitting in the pews, listening to your words.

Marie M. Fortune, editor of the *Journal of Religion & Abuse*, and John McClure, guest editor [vol. 4 #1, 2002], write, “Preaching is a perilous task whether for the guest preacher or resident preacher. The guest preacher has the challenge of not necessarily knowing her/his audience. But she/he has the advantage, especially when addressing ‘difficult’ issues, of being able to be forthright and prophetic, i.e., opening ‘a can of worms,’ and leaving. The challenge for the resident preacher is that she/he has to live with the ‘can of worms’ which she/he opens.”

“Preachers have been silent for long enough. The time is right for churches to get involved, and involvement must include the pulpit. We as preachers, can become agents of resistance, change, and hope. We can and must break the silence and tell the truth about sexual and domestic violence.” [John McClure, *Telling the Truth*]

In the book, *Telling the Truth*, John McClure writes about speaking out about sexual and domestic violence from the pulpit. He enumerates three goals:

- To speak a word of hospitality, resistance, and hope to victims and survivors.
- To send a message that the church will cease to be a place of easy rationalization and cheap grace for abusers.
- To invite the congregation as a whole to consider how it might become a “safe place” and a force for compassion and resistance in relation to sexual and domestic violence.

*In Striking Terror No More*, Beth Basham and Sara Lisherness, editors, we are asked to acknowledge that some scripture is irredeemably patriarchal and misogynous, but that we need to affirm that scriptures do not justify abuse although these scriptures are often misused. *The*

resource continues to speak of “flawed theology” and lists biblical texts that assist in addressing violence.

James Newton Poling in *Understanding Male Violence*, says that we need to reevaluate certain traditional doctrines:

*We need to listen to our own sermons, prayers, hymns, litanies, and all worship materials for how they will be heard by persons who are experiencing violence in their families, by persons who are in crisis right now because of violence, by adult survivors who are recovering from the effects of violence in their past, and by perpetrators of violence. The “least of these” principle of solidarity with the most vulnerable is crucial when preaching to perpetrators of violence.*

Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, editors of *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, remind us that “throughout the centuries...the Bible has been invoked to justify women’s subordination to men.” It is important to reach into the resources that come from feminist biblical scholarship to uncover a voice that may challenge traditional biblical study and commentary.

Having read all of this, take the risk to speak prophetically and pastorally and become a place where victims can find sanctuary and perpetrators are held accountable. Both need healing.... and it starts when the silence is broken.

Resources mentioned above:

Marie M. Fortune, editor, *Journal of Religion & Abuse*, (Binghamton, NY, Volume 4, #1, 2002)

John S. McClure and Nancy J. Ramsay, *Telling the Truth* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1998)

James N. Poling, *Understanding Male Violence; Pastoral Care Issues* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003)

Beth Basham and Sara Lisherness, editors, *Striking Terror No More* (Louisville, KY, Bridge Resources, 2006)

Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, editors, *The Women’s Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992)

## **RESPONDING TO DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: GUIDELINES FOR PASTORS, RABBIS, IMAMS AND OTHER RELIGIOUS LEADERS**

Remember the Goals:

1. SAFETY for the woman and children
2. ACCOUNTABILITY for the abuser
3. RESTORATION of individuals and, IF POSSIBLE, relationships  
OR  
MOURNING the loss of the relationships

### **DOs and DON'Ts with a battered woman**

DO believe her. Her description of the violence is only the tip of the iceberg.

DO reassure her that this is not her fault, she doesn't deserve this treatment, it is not God's will for her.

DO give her referral information; primary resources are battered women's services or shelters and National Hotline. **1-800-799-SAFE (7233) 1-800-787-3224 (TDD)**

DO support and respect her choices. Even if she is aware of the risks and chooses initially to return to the abuser, it is her choice. She has the most information about how to survive.

DO encourage her to think about a safety plan: set aside some money; copies of important papers for her and children; a change of clothes hidden or in care of a friend if she decides to go to a shelter. Plan how to exit the house the next time the abuser is violent. Plan what to do about the children if they are at school; if they are asleep, etc. (This is both practical and helps her stay in touch with the reality of the abuser's violence. Safety planning is a process that is ongoing.)

DO protect her confidentiality. DO NOT give information about her or her whereabouts to the abuser or to others who might pass information on to the abuser. Do not discuss with the parish council/session/elders who might inadvertently pass information on to the abuser.

DO help her with any religious concerns. If she is Christian, give her a copy of **KEEPING THE FAITH: GUIDANCE FOR CHRISTIAN WOMEN FACING ABUSE**. Refer to [www.faihtitrustinstitute.org](http://www.faihtitrustinstitute.org) for copies of this book and other helpful information.

DO emphasize that the marriage covenant is broken by the violence from her partner. DO assure her of God's love and presence, of your commitment to walk with her through this valley of the shadow of death.

DO help her see that her partner's violence has broken the marriage covenant and that God does not want her to remain in a situation where her life and the lives of her children are in danger.

If she decides to separate and divorce, DO support her and help her to mourn the loss to herself and her children.

DO pray with her. Ask God to give her the strength and courage she needs.

DON'T minimize the danger to her. You can be a reality check. "From what you have told me, I am very much concerned for your safety . . ."

DON'T tell her what to do. Give information and support.

DON'T react with disbelief, disgust, or anger at what she tells you. But don't react passively either. Let her know that you are concerned and that what the abuser has done to her is wrong and not deserved by her.

DON'T blame her for his violence. If she is blaming herself, try to reframe: "I don't care if you did have supper late or forget to water the lawn, that is no reason for him to be violent with you. This is his problem."

DON'T recommend couples counseling or approach her husband and ask for "his side of the story." These actions will endanger her.

DON'T recommend "marriage enrichment," "mediation," or a "communications workshop." None of these will address the goals listed above.

DON'T send her home with just a prayer and directive to submit to her husband, bring him to church, or be a better Christian wife.

DON'T encourage her to forgive him and take him back.

DO NOT encourage her dependence on you OR BECOME EMOTIONALLY OR SEXUALLY INVOLVED WITH HER.

DON'T do nothing.

DO consult with colleagues in the wider community who may have expertise and be able to assist you in your response. Refer to [www.faithtrustinstitute.org](http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org) for resources.

Produced and distributed by the FaithTrust Institute, 1-877-860-2255, 2400 North 45<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 10, Seattle, Washington 98103

# A POLICY STATEMENT ON DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COUPLES COUNSELING

**The following policy statement on couples counseling appears in *Confronting the Batterer*, written by Phyllis B. Frank, M.A. and Beverly D. Houghton, Ph.D., for the Volunteer for Counseling Service of Rockland Co., Inc. It is reprinted here with the permission of Phyllis B. Frank.**

*Couple counseling is not a viable therapeutic tool for use in violent family relationships.* We define a violent family relationship as one in which physical or sexual assaults occur, threats of violence occur, and/or woman lives in an environment of fear caused by her partner. Couple counseling remains inappropriate even when both parties request it and/or want to maintain the couple relationship.

Couple counseling is beneficial to work on marital problems. Wife battering, however, is a violent criminal act, not a marital problem. It is illegal. It is a behavior that is solely the responsibility of the violent person, is chosen by him, and he alone is capable of changing it. This is true regardless of the alleged provocation, since the behavior of one family member cannot compel another family member to be violent. Violent behavior must be addressed and stopped *before* couple counseling takes place.

Volunteer Counseling Services will not utilize couple counseling in violent relationships. Treating a couple together, before violence is addressed and stopped, could:

1. Endanger the battered woman who may face violence or threats of violence for revealing information during therapy which is disapproved by her partner;
2. Lend credence to the common misunderstanding that battered women are responsible for the violence inflicted upon them;
3. Ignore the denial, minimization and deception about the violence that occurs when the focus of counseling is on the couple's interaction.
4. Indicate that the therapist condones violence or that violence is acceptable or not important;
5. Reinforce stereotypic sex roles, thereby ignoring the battered woman's right and responsibility to choose whether or not to save the relationship;
6. Increase the battered woman's sense of isolation, as she may prevaricate about the violence of fear to speak, even in therapy. This can have the effect of discouraging her from taking any other positive action to eliminate the violence inflicted upon her; and

7. Imply that the battered woman has responsibility for seeing that the batterer gets help. Therapists need to be particularly wary of the manipulation inherent in a batterer's refusal of anything other than couple treatment.

VCS will recommend referral to a community's domestic violence services (shelters, safe-homes, support groups, advocacy services, and batterer's rehabilitation programs), to provide safety, legal assistance, and expertise in dealing with violence. Battered women should be encouraged to utilize these services. VCS further recommends that services be mandated for batterers. Should one or both partners receive individual counseling as a result, it is vital that the therapist be knowledgeable about the issue of domestic violence and therapeutic implications for treating battered women and batterers. This includes that therapists not assume that equal power exists in male/female relationships or that each partner is able to talk openly about violence. Therapists should directly and separately interview each partner to assess the incidence and current extent of the violence occurring in the relationship.

Ending violence in the relationship is dependent solely on the batterer's motivation and commitment to do so. This will not always happen and, if it does, it may not occur overnight. It is possible only if the batterer seeks help, gets help and keeps working at it. Many men will drop out of treatment along the way. However, even continued participation by a batterer in a program is no guarantee that he will change. If battering continues, a woman may eventually need to ask herself, "Am I willing to stay in a violent relationship?" The answer to that must be arrived at by each individual woman.

If the batterer does change and the relationship is intact, couple counseling becomes a viable modality--but only for nonviolent couples in which both partners separately request couple counseling. A former violent man can be redefined as nonviolent if:

- The former batterer participates in some form of ongoing treatment (educational workshop, support groups, individual counseling, etc.) to consolidate his behavioral change and to prove his commitment to work on ending his violence.
- The former batterer acknowledges his responsibility for his violent actions; he recognizes his ability to control and stop his violence toward his partner; he further states clearly that he will not be violent towards her; she validates, in a separate session, not only that he has not been violent, but that he has affirmed to her his commitment never to be so again;
- A significant period of time passes during which his treatment continues and there is no further violence (approximately one year from onset treatment).

The batterer and the battered woman have two different problems. His problem is his violent behavior. Hers is that she is coupled with a batterer. These two distinct issues are safely and effectively dealt with in separate counseling.

# "WHAT IF..."

## WHAT IF YOU ARE A NEW PASTOR IN A NEW COMMUNITY?

### **Community/Congregational Response**

- ❖ Familiarize yourself with local domestic violence shelters, support groups and hotlines.
- ❖ Introduce yourself to local shelter workers and other advocates. Remember that often pastors have given abused persons harmful messages that have endangered them. You will need to show that you will be a good partner with them. If possible, attend the training that they provide for volunteers.
- ❖ Join your state coalition against domestic violence.
- ❖ Ask whether your new presbytery has a committee that addresses domestic violence.
- ❖ If your presbytery does not supply them, arrange to have cards printed with hotline numbers in the restrooms of the church. Encourage other churches to follow your lead.
- ❖ In the church narthex and/or fellowship hall, make available pamphlets about PADVN and domestic violence, especially the pamphlet, "What Every Congregation Needs to Know About Domestic Violence..." (see resources)

### **Theological/Scriptural Response**

- ❖ In worship services, include prayers for those suffering from, recovering from and survivors of domestic violence.
- ❖ Name and discuss the problem of domestic violence in sermons. Even the slightest reference indicates to victims that you can be trusted with their situation.
- ❖ Study scripture readings from the perspective of someone experiencing domestic violence. Listen carefully to how the text might be heard by victims and survivors.
- ❖ Be alert to those who might misinterpret scriptures that keep women in submissive roles.
- ❖ Be aware that victims may have distorted theological beliefs concerning suffering and forgiveness and that their beliefs may keep them in abusive relationships.

## **Legal Response**

- ❖ Find resources within the congregation: Are there any congregation members who work in shelters, social workers, or lawyers who specialize in family law? Utilize such members to familiarize yourself with local laws and answer any questions you might have.
- ❖ Try to identify an attorney who is willing to work on a pro-bono basis with victims.

## **Pastoral Response**

- ❖ Make a list of hotline and shelter phone numbers, and have the list in several places — in your car, in the office, and at home.
- ❖ Practice how you will respond to both victims and abusers.
- ❖ Make sure you discuss domestic violence during family or pre-marital counseling sessions. Always meet with persons individually to establish that violence is not part of their relationship.

## **Educational Response**

- ❖ Continue to educate yourself. Use your continuing education funds to attend the next national or local event on domestic violence.
- ❖ Talk to elders (or other pastors) in your church: What has the church done lately to address domestic violence in the community and in the church?
- ❖ Ask the church's Christian Education Committee to offer an age-appropriate series on domestic violence for all Sunday School classes, from preschool through adult.
- ❖ If your church is not already a member, ask the church to become a member of Presbyterians Against Domestic Violence Network (PADVN) to obtain current information about abuse.
- ❖ Ask the presbytery if you can make a presentation on PADVN or have table space for materials about abuse at a presbytery meeting.
- ❖ Use the denominational resources for educational events. Members of PADVN are available for training or consultation and many resources can be borrowed from the PHEWA office. (see resource list)

# "WHAT IF..."

## WHAT IF MEMBERS AND LEADERS OF A CONGREGATION DISCOVERED THAT AN ORDAINED CHURCH OFFICER (PASTOR, ELDER OR DEACON) WAS CHARGED WITH DOMESTIC VIOLENCE WITHIN HIS OR HER FAMILY?

*What are the issues that need to be worked through and addressed by the community of faith?*

### **Background**

Domestic Violence is defined as any controlling, coercive and/or sometimes violent behavior directed by one family member to a spouse, child, parent or sibling with the purpose of gaining and maintaining power and control over the life of the victim. Abuse can occur in a variety of ways. It can be physical use of brute force, emotional cruelty and verbal assault, economic control over the victim's use of money, sexual abuse through force or the threat of force, or coercion for the sole sexual gratification of the perpetrator. Or abuse can be neglect – failing to offer any care, or offering inadequate care for the basic physical, psychological and emotional needs of a child or a disabled adult.

### **The Procedure**

The charge of domestic violence is a most serious legal, moral, social and psychological charge against an individual. Anytime the charge of domestic violence is made it has a profound impact on the victim and the accused perpetrator and every effort must be made to determine the facts of the case. In the case of an elder or deacon who is accused, the Session shall appoint an investigative committee composed of not less than two ordained elders, and the pastor (unless he or she is the accused) to determine if the charges are substantiated. If the pastor of the congregation is accused, the case is referred to the Presbytery Committee on Ministry (COM) for judicial proceedings conducted by a Presbytery Permanent Judicial Commission (PPJC). If after investigation, the evidence is well substantiated, then the Session in consultation with the Presbytery Committee on Ministry, or in the case of an accused pastor, the Presbytery PJC shall engage in disciplinary action of the accused church officer. This may result in the exclusion of the accused from ordained office, and the need for supervised rehabilitation. (See PCUSA Book of Order -Section on Discipline, Chapters D10.0000-14.0000) Note: an ecclesial trial does not preclude the need for a civil trial nor can a civil trial decide how the church is to respond.

### **Individual/Theological Issues**

Domestic Violence is a clear manifestation of human sin at work in the most intimate of human relationships. It is the gross distortion of the covenant of love within a family – replacing love, trust, affection and care with fear, coercion, violence, manipulation and control. The basic dignity of the victim as being a child of God is violated, as is the covenant of marriage. In addition the spiritual wellbeing of the perpetrator has been severely impacted and violated.

## **Congregational/Theological Issues**

When an ordained leader is the perpetrator, the vows of ordination are violated along with the level of trust of the community of faith in his or her role as a church leader. (Refer to chapter G-14.0000 in the Book of Order) Engaging in acts of domestic violence not only adversely affects the victim and family, it adversely impacts the community of faith that the perpetrator has vowed to lead with Christ-like love and integrity. Some who love and respect the accused church officer will feel very divided about the accused role of leadership; others may openly side against the leader. Strong leadership from the other officers of the church is needed to interpret the offense in light of the Gospel, emphasizing restoration and justice for the victim, and holding the perpetrator accountable for the acts of violence. Carefully selected and trained leaders in the congregation or Presbytery must be selected to minister to the perpetrator as a fellow Christian in need of redemption. The congregation must respond to the case of abuse as a violation of the love and justice of Jesus Christ, and a violation against the church as the Body of Christ. If the church fails to act, it becomes a silent, but knowing partner, in the sinfulness of abuse. (Refer to Ephesians 5: 21-31, particularly noting the mutuality and the self-giving love of Christ for the church as the pattern for a Christian understanding of God's will for marriage partners.)

## **Pastoral Issues**

For the church to turn a blind eye to the presence of domestic violence within the community of faith is to communicate tolerance of abuse to both the victim and the larger community. Making the assumption that domestic violence doesn't happen within Presbyterian churches tends to perpetuate a code of silence among its leaders and members. Nationally, one in four families will face domestic violence at some point in their lives together. This figure includes individuals from every social, economic, religious, and educational background. Preaching, corporate prayer, Christian Education classes and events, and fellowship gatherings all provide an appropriate forum for the church to speak out on domestic violence issues. Knowing the official position of the church on these issues often gives permission to victims of domestic violence or other family members to share their stories with their religious leaders. Not knowing the position of the local church and its leaders often communicates to a victim that it may not be safe to share the story with religious leaders.

Couples' counseling as a means of working with cases of domestic violence is not ever a healthy beginning point. This is partly because the spouse/victim will not be afforded a chance to speak openly without fear of reprisal, and partly because the perpetrator will find a way to dispute and distort the victim's statements and perspective. The perpetrator will control the focus of the counseling or shift the blame to the victim. Despite one's best intentions it would also be inappropriate for the pastor or session to tell the victim what she should or should not do in response to abuse. It is very appropriate for the pastor to advise the person but the final choice of action remains with the victim to take control over their life and not the pastor.

## **Legal Issues**

When the victim of domestic violence is a minor, states require that anyone who has knowledge of the abuse must report it to the proper authorities. Failure to report such a case can result in the leaders of the congregation and the church being sued on charges of negligence. If the victim of domestic violence is an adult, state laws vary. If the victim can demonstrate that advice or

intervention was sought from the church and received no help, and if the case later results in serious physical, sexual or psychological injury, the pastor or the governing board might be held liable for neglect.

*Additional resources*

Beth Basham and Sara Lisherness editors, Striking Terror No More- The Church Responds to Domestic Violence. Bridge Resources Presbyterian Church USA, Louisville, KY. 1997.

Beth Swagman, Responding To Domestic Violence. A Resource for Church Leaders. Faith Alive Christian Resources Grand Rapids, Michigan. 2002.

# "WHAT IF..."

## WHAT IF THE CHURCH OR THE PRESBYTERY DOESN'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

There are many reasons people don't want to talk about domestic violence...

They feel that it isn't taking place in their church;

They think it is a private matter;

It is a very disturbing issue;

People don't know what to do about it.

Hopefully, no one in our churches still believes that if someone marries and violence occurs, it is his or her cross to bear (most often it is her).

Domestic violence cuts across all social and cultural borders – race, economic class, education, age, etc. That means that violence is probably taking place in some family in every one of our churches. If for no other reason, we should be concerned with violence because it affects our children. Children can become victims themselves, and even witnessing the violence can have serious developmental consequences on them. The 2004 PADVN Domestic Violence Packet examined the theme of children witnessing domestic violence – the packet can be seen at [www.pcusa.org/phewa/padvn](http://www.pcusa.org/phewa/padvn).

What, then, do we do to get the presbytery or our church involved? First, we make our case. We learn about the situation in our community by talking with persons in shelters, the police, etc. We need to be able to state with certainty that violence occurs frequently in our community. Most cities keep careful records of reported instances of domestic violence.

Then we look to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for the rationale to be concerned. In our Book of Order, The great Ends of the Church (G-1.0200) states:

*The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of human kind, the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the promotion of social righteousness, the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.*

Our church is not sheltering or nurturing its members if they are living in violence without our walking beside them. We are not promoting social righteousness if we are not confronting abusers; nor are we exhibiting the Kingdom of Heaven if in our midst are persons being physically abused.

In our Brief Statement of Faith we learn that, *In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God's image, male and female...to live as one community.* Certainly community is being broken when violence exists. Domestic violence is all about "power over" which flies in the face of equality between men and women. In addition, if we are made in the image of God, violence against women is violence against the image of God.

The 213th General Assembly (2001) approved a policy statement, *Turn Mourning Into Dancing! A Policy Statement on Healing Domestic Violence*. It is a great help in understanding domestic violence. That policy gives us credibility when we approach the presbytery or the church to address the issue. In the policy, you will find several scripture references that emphasize that the church is called to be:

- A sanctuary;
- An empathetic community;
- A covenant community;
- A healing community.

When we are confident that we can present the need, clearly and cogently, there are several approaches we can take:

- Try to interest the person in charge of Christian Education in the church and/or presbytery to make domestic violence a priority in the curriculum.
- Approach Presbyterian Women to garner support. Although domestic violence is a community problem and not a “women’s problem,” women probably are more sympathetic to the issue. In addition, Presbyterian Women have a wonderful communication system that would be effective in urging interest in the topic.
- If possible, ask a survivor to tell her story to the session or presbytery leadership.
- Ask your pastor to preach on domestic violence and include the issue in pastoral prayers.
- Approach the presbytery Peacemaking Committee. Domestic Violence legitimately falls within their sphere. Ask them to petition the presbytery to have training on domestic violence and strongly encourage all pastors and a representative from each church to attend.
- Approach the youth director in your church and the presbytery to request that they include domestic violence and dating violence in their program. It is imperative that we reach young people before the pattern is set and to prevent them from being wounded.
- Brainstorm with your friends in the church about how to address the church’s or the presbytery’s recalcitrance. You will come up with some wonderful ideas.

Above all, don’t give up. God doesn’t mean for people to live in violent situations, especially in the family—a sacred space. Rely on prayer throughout your endeavor, for strength and direction.